

Joseph and the Sin of Pride

Case 3: A Baffling Dream

A third point put forward to strengthen the argument concerning Joseph's prideful character was his decision to share his dreams with his family. There seems to be a general consensus among preachers that Joseph erred greatly in sharing his dreams with his family. In a sermon concerning Joseph and posted online, one pastor had this to say about Joseph's sharing of his dreams with his brothers:

There seems to be a problem for Joseph here. Maybe he sees this as a chance to gain a little advantage over his mean older brothers. You know, "Na na na na na!" I had a dream and you all bowed down to me!

I'm convinced that sharing the content of that dream with his brothers was a foolish mistake. He was just pouring fuel on the fire. Joseph was increasing his brothers' hostility. Why did Joseph do that? There is no indication that God instructed him to share the content of the dream. So why did Joseph share the content of his dream with his brothers? Didn't Joseph realize how his brothers would react? Was he just naive or stupid?¹

While this pastor's content seems to be somewhat extreme, it nevertheless captures what so many preachers and teachers – and thus church members who believe them – generally believe about Joseph. Once again, if we are to understand the truth of the story, we must not listen to what "thus saith my pastor" as we should first begin with studying what "thus saith the Lord."

The Bible does not tell us how the brothers reacted to the evil reports concerning them that Joseph had given to Jacob. However, when Joseph wore the coat given to him by his father, the Bible says his brothers hated him (verse 4). Then, when Joseph shared his first dream with his brothers, the Bible says they "hated him even more" (verse 5).

One might argue that the brothers were not angry with the dreams as much as they were angry that Joseph told them about the dreams. Yet verse eight says "they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words." In other words, the brothers were angered that Joseph would even dare to dream such dreams – as if Joseph had control over what he dreamed.

Maybe what has happened here is that too many commentators have allowed the reaction of the brothers to reflect back on Joseph so that he bears some of the blame for the situation. Those who do so are guilty of determining Joseph's motives by the reaction his words had on his audience.

In the language of today's cultural philosophy, such an interpretation accuses Joseph of "hate speech." The fact that Joseph dreamed such dreams was bad enough, but for him to share them with others was completely unacceptable behavior. To speak truth to others who are offended by our speech is not only offensive but intolerable. If what we say causes another person to hate us for saying it, then what we said must be considered hateful speech. Such a concept is totally wrong for today's culture and equally in error when projected backwards to ancient times.

Once again, there is no evidence, short of conjecture and a dependence on fallacious tradition, that Joseph revealed his dreams to his family for any other reason but curiosity and a simple desire to

understand the meaning behind the dreams. Joseph did nothing more than share the dreams given him by God.

He may have given a bad report, but there is no evidence that the report was false or that Joseph intended any malice. He may have worn a coat that offended his brothers, but he most likely did so out of respect for his father. To believe – and even worse, to preach – that Joseph allowed these dreams to go to his head and that he intentionally allowed these dreams to create division in his family is conjecture and not based on what "thus saith the Lord." Joseph was a dreamer – persecuted because he exercised the gift of God. Here was one man in the crowd who, in the midst of idolatry and hatred, was willing to proclaim the message from God – even though he may not have understood it as such at the time – and we accuse him of pride. How sad.

A quick word study will show that the Bible records 21 dreams by fourteen different people. One could argue that there were many more than 21 if visions are included in the number. The Old Testament seems to equate the two – visions and dreams – on some occasions (For examples, refer to Daniel 7:1, Job 33:15, and Isaiah 29:7.) For the sake of argument, however, this chapter will assume that dreams occur while one is asleep and visions while one is awake.

Regardless of whether or not dreams and visions are categorized together or separately, all of those episodes clearly identified as dreams have one thing in common – they are known. The only way that a dream can become known is for the dreamer to share it with other people. Yet no other dreamer in the Bible is accused of pride for having shared their dreams except Joseph, the son of Jacob.

Abraham, Joseph's great-grandfather, had dreams in which God promised to make him a nation that would outnumber the stars in the sky and the sands of the sea. And we know about those dreams, so Abraham had to have told someone about them – most likely, his family. Yet no one dares to accuse Abraham of pride for doing so.

Jacob himself had several dreams in which God promised to deliver him from the trials before him and to make of him a great nation, reaffirming the promises made to Abraham and Isaac. Since those dreams are recorded in great detail in the Old Testament, Jacob had to have told someone about them. They were so well-preserved that Moses, the son of Levi, grandson of Jacob, was able to write them down in detail in the book of Genesis.

How did Moses learn about those dreams unless Jacob told his family about them? Why is there no accusation of pride made against Jacob for having shared his dreams – dreams which certainly indicated that Jacob would be one of the greatest men that ever lived – greater than anyone else in his family?

Chapter 7 of the book of Daniel tells about a dream of Daniel while a captive in Babylon, referred to in the text as "visions of his head as he lay in his bed." At the end of verse one, we learn that Daniel "wrote down the dream and told the sum of the matter." Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament paraphrase those final words of verse 1: "Immediately thereafter Daniel wrote down the principal parts of the dream, that it might be publicly proclaimed."²

Daniel did not intend to share his dream with just a few close relatives. He intended for the whole kingdom to know about it. Yet there is no biblical commentator who would venture to accuse Daniel of being guilty of the abhorrent crime of pride for his actions. One reason may be that there is no indication that Daniel's family and friends were angered by his dreams.

Interestingly, there is a man named Joseph who dreamed dreams in the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. This Joseph was the husband of Mary and the earthly father of Jesus. On four different occasions, the Bible records that Joseph had dreams. In the first of these, Joseph was informed that his wife, Mary, would give birth to the Messiah – the most longed for person in all of Jewish history (Matt. 1:20-21).

Since we know about the dream, Joseph had to have related it to others. Why? Could it be because Joseph was filled with pride at being the earthly father of the Messiah? Should we not condemn him for sharing such a dream with others who could easily covet such a revelation and hate Joseph for it?

On other occasions, God gave Joseph specific instructions on when and where to move his family to protect the life of Jesus (Matt. 2:13, 2:19, 2:22). Once again, Joseph had to have shared his dreams since no one could have known about them had he not. Here the response of every commentator is the same: not one of them accuses Joseph of pride for sharing his dreams.

One commentator who did not necessarily buy into the idea that pride motivated Joseph's revelation of his dreams to his family was Alexander MacLaren.

Note that Joseph did not tell his dreams with elation, or with a notion that they meant anything particular. It is plainly the singularity of them that makes him repeat them, as is clearly indicated by the repeated 'behold' in his two reports. With perfect innocence of intention, and as he would have told any other strange dream, the lad repeats them. The commentary was the work of his brothers, who were ready to find proofs of his being put above them, and of his wish to humiliate them, in anything he said or did.³

Conclusion

A study of the life of Joseph will reveal that the Bible never makes even one negative statement about the character of Joseph, a biblical personality understood by many to be a precursor or type of Christ. To refer to his actions and attitude toward his family in Gen. 37 as prideful is really unfortunate. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing in his life ever indicates that Joseph ever responded to any person or situation except with absolute humility.

James Boice said of Joseph, "He was loved and hated, favored and abused, tempted and trusted, exalted and abased. Yet at no point in the one-hundred-and-ten-year life of Joseph did he ever seem to get his eyes off God or cease to trust him. Adversity did not harden his character. Prosperity did not ruin him. He was the same in private as in public. He was a truly great man."⁴

Read what the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* has to say about Joseph:

In Joseph we meet a type of character rare in any race...what chiefly strikes one in Joseph is a combination of grace and power...self-control and incorruptible purity...Joseph had a surplus of power which enabled him to be cheerful and alert in doleful circumstances...He had Abraham's dignity and capacity, Isaac's purity and power of self-devotion, Jacob's cleverness and buoyancy and tenacity. From his mother's family he had personal beauty, humour, and management...the conduct of his father and brothers towards him must have made him self-conscious, even though he had been wholly innocent of introspection.⁵

Certainly Joseph was sinful, as are we all, and pride may have been a challenge for him at times. One might even argue that the reason Joseph was so humble in his later life was due to the traumatic experiences of nearly dying at the hands of his brothers who were angered by his prideful behavior, of then being sold into slavery, and facing an indefinite prison sentence, but the Bible does not tell us this is true.

Though the 19th Century language may sound a bit over-done for a 21st Century reader, Charles Spurgeon had a completely different take on the character of Joseph from more contemporary authors and commentators:

When he was a boy, his father loved him. The youth was fair and beautiful; in person he was to be admired; moreover, he had a mind that was gigantic, and an intellect that was lofty; but, best of all, in him dwelt the Spirit of the living God. He was one who talked with God; a youth of piety and prayerfulness; beloved of God, even more than he was by his earthly father. O! how his father loved him! for in his fond affection, he made him a princely coat of many colors, and treated him better than the others – a natural but foolish way of showing his fondness.

Therefore his brethren hated him. Full often did they jeer at the youthful Joseph, when he retired to his prayers; when he was with them at a distance from his father's house, he was their drudge, their slave; the taunt, the jeer, did often wound his heart, and the young child endured much secret sorrow.⁶

While Spurgeon's interpretation of Joseph is certainly more flattering than the examples viewed previously, nevertheless, honesty requires one to note that, like the interpretations which view Joseph as prideful in his conduct with his brothers, there is much more conjecture in this interpretation of Spurgeon's than there is biblical interpretation. Within the context of Genesis 37 there is no specific statement that would allow one to describe Joseph as having a gigantic mind or a lofty intellect, or of practicing a pious and prayerful habit of life.

But neither is there even one specific statement that would lead to the contrary conclusion – that Joseph acted out of ignorance or pride in dealing with his family or others.

¹ Derek Morris, former pastor of the Forest Lake Church in Apopka, FL. Used by permission.

<http://www.bettersermons.org/article/423/sermon-resources/sermon-series/derek-morris/dangerous-dreams>

² Keil & Delitzsch Old Testament Commentary, Online Bible Edition, Version 4.32.01, July 18, 2014, Copyright © 1987-2014, Larry Pierce, Winterbourne, Ontario, Canada NOB 2VO. Referenced hereafter as Online Bible.

³ MacLaren, Alexander. *Expositions of Holy Scripture*. <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/maclaren/genesis/37.htm>

⁴ This quote by James Boice is used in an online commentary by David Guzik.
<http://www.enduringword.com/commentaries/0137.htm>

⁵ Nicoll, William R. "Commentary on Genesis 37:1". "Expositor's Bible Commentary".
<http://www.studylight.org/commentaries/teb/view.cgi?bk=0&ch=37>

⁶ <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0017.htm>